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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000732

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SUBJECT: ONE HAND CANNOT CLAP: SADR'S PERIOD OF ISOLATION

Classified By: Pol Counselor Matt Tueller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) In a March 7 statement Shi'a leader Muqtada al-Sadr distanced himself one step further from contemporary Iraqi politics, telling his followers he was in a state of "corporeal separation" due to their continuing disobedience. Immediately afterwards Sadrists leaders sought to reassure confused followers, explaining that Sadr's isolation was temporary and that he remained the overall leader of the Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) and the Sadr Trend. Sadr himself issued another written statement on March 9, calling on his followers to resolve disputes peacefully but maintaining JAM's status as a military entity. Sadr's public criticism of his followers, and his lieutenant's frantic media response, illustrate the degree to which the movement is turning on itself. In the short-term, Sadr's self-imposed seclusion will increase confusion and fragmentation within the movement, providing both challenges and opportunities to the U.S. and GOI. End Summary.

¶2. (C) During Friday prayers on March 7, Muqtada al-Sadr distributed a statement in Karbala announcing his "corporeal separation" from his followers, "if that is the right expression for it." Sadr identified two reasons for his suspension, "the first my father's instruction to me to study...and the second the liberation of Iraq and making our society Islamic." Sadr said contemporary Iraq is "worldly" and characterized by dissension. He said the failure of many Iraqis to turn to the seminary "separated us and divided them" and added that "many we had a good opinion of plunged into the chasms of politics and its ravines and earthly things and its parties." Sadr then emphasized his frustration and disappointment with the movement that bears his name. Although he acknowledged that "there are many faithful representing me" he seemed to concede efforts to consolidate his authority have failed, criticizing the independent nature of his followers and saying their deviation "pushed me to withdraw, as a means of objecting to them and to insure that I was blameless before God" and that "a single hand cannot clap." Finally, Sadr said that full-time management of the Sadr Trend's "political, social, and economic" affairs would be turned over to a committee.

¶3. (C) Almost immediately, Sadr's inner circle sought to clarify Sadr's statement and emphasize his continued importance to the movement. In a subsequent press conference, Sadr spokesman Sheikh Salah al-Ubaidi denied that Sadr was "retiring" from politics. Instead, Ubaidi explained, Sadr's frustration with his followers has led him to turn his full attention to religious studies "for a period of time." On March 9, Sadrists lieutenant Sheikh Luwa' Smaisim disputed accounts that there was a split within the Sadr Trend, saying "the numbers of the Sadr Trend are estimated in the hundreds of thousands and the departure of a few leaders does not constitute a split." He added that "Muqtada is not cut off completely from the political scene, and he continues to be the supreme commander of the Jaysh al-Mahdi and the Sadr Trend" and that Sadr will continue to

guide Sadrists leaders in "important matters."

14. (C) On March 9 Sadr delivered a written response to a series of questions posed by followers on the future of the movement and the appropriate response to raids and arrests. His response was alternately aggressive and conciliatory and did little to clarify his intentions. On one hand, Sadr called on his followers to "entrench ourselves culturally, religiously, ideologically, and socially to stand against the barbaric onslaught and crusade against Islam." He condemned arrest campaigns, calling them "unacceptable legally, rationally, and even internationally" and affirmed the right of JAM members to act in self-defense. Asked whether the purpose of the freeze was to convert JAM into a cultural organization, he responded that the goal of the freeze was "not its conversion into an association, rather it is a period for education and reform and training, and there is no contradiction between the Jaysh al-Mahdi being a military army and being humanitarian and cultural." Sadr went on to urge his followers to resolve disputes "in a peaceful manner, including through representatives of the Sadr Bloc in parliament." (Note: On March 5 Sadrists MP Falah al-Shinshali threatened protests over the Presidency Council's veto of the Provincial Powers legislation. End Note.) Finally, Sadr called for the realization of "legitimate reconciliation" to stop conflicts "among Muslims in Iraqi cities."

15. (C) At least one secular Shia contact found Sadr's statements &enormously dangerous.<sup>8</sup> Even worse than the reaffirmation of Jaysh al-Mahdi's military role, according to this contact, is the prospect of Sadr achieving the rank of ayatollah. (Although the course of study to achieve that rank would normally take at least a decade, our contact predicts that Sadr will &complete<sup>8</sup> his studies within a

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year.) Becoming an ayatollah will allow Sadr to issue his own legal rulings (i.e., fatwas), thereby making him a potentially much more powerful figure in Iraqi society.

16. (C) Comment: Sadr's Friday statement is an extraordinary admission of either his disinterest in or inability to control his own movement. Never an especially enthusiastic manager, he seems to have concluded his time is better spent in religious study rather than in steering an increasingly fractious popular movement. Sadr's withdrawal comes a mere two weeks after he announced a six-month extension of the JAM "freeze" and amid growing speculation over the viability of the movement and Sadr's whereabouts and future intentions. The immediate impact will be to increase the fragmentation and confusion within the Sadrists trend and JAM. This instability presents both opportunities and risks. On the one hand, Sadr's edging away from the limelight may create new opportunities for engaging his more moderate followers. On the other hand, we may see the JAM ceasefire grow looser as Special Group leaders and other rogue elements decide to capitalize on Sadr's absence (and dissatisfaction within JAM's ranks regarding the freeze) vie for operational control of the movement.

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